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ABSTRACT

Listening remains generally unappreciated while being the communicative skill most used and essential to the human condition. There is no name for the condition of being unable to listen, but the term "illistenacy" could be used. An individual who can hear but cannot consciously attend, understand, and respond to non-written messages in a consistent and effective manner could be termed an "illistenate." Such a person's reception of messages is sporadic and virtually accidental. Four hidden assumptions sustain illistenacy. First, people confuse the involuntary, physical process of hearing with the voluntary, mental one of listening. Second, the confusion produces the assumption that passive physical presence equates with listening. Third, illistenates view communication as a magical act that either works or doesn't, and that nothing can be done to change it. Finally, there is the assumption that listening ability develops naturally through maturity and correlates with intelligence. Illistenacy can distort educational efforts, as teachers may wrongly assume that students already know how to listen. In fact, effective listening instruction and testing are urgently needed. (Three charts are included.) (SG)

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THE POWER OF A NAME

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"Must everything have a name?" asked Alice. Humpty-Dumpty replied, "Of course, it must... My name means the shape I am... With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost."

- Through the Looking Glass.

"... the war was lost, all for the want of a horseshoe nail."

- Mother Goose

Out of the endless data constituting reality, a name selects, accentuates and interprets the things we recognize. Names identify; they label, giving substance and shape to our reality. Without a name, we have difficulty conceiving of something. Names are powerful; they establish value.

Significantly, the name of a negative condition clarifies and heightens what we value as positive. Negatives intensify the major positives in our culture such as bad-good, ugly-beauty, illness-health, illiteracy-literacy. Without an antonym, an otherwise positive phenomena is inconsequential.

Consider the names of the following negative conditions and how they accentuate the positive:

- A person unable to see is BLIND.
- A person unable to hear is DEAF.
- A person unable to talk is MUTE or DUMB.
- A person unable to read or write is ILLITERATE.
- A person unable to listen is _____.

Intriguingly, a name specifically identifying a person unable to listen cannot be found. Nameless, the condition of unable-to-listen is without substance, an unknown. We cannot hear (conceive) of someone being unable-to-listen. That void impacts on listening.

During the past sixty years, listening has been described variously as the secret skill: an orphan, invisible, lost, least understood, underdeveloped, most used and least taught, overlooked, forgotten, neglected and ignored. Without an antonym, listening remains the un-skill -- unmentioned, unexamined, untaught, unlearned and unvalued.

Historically, being unable-to-listen has remained unidentified because the words, "hearing" and "listening," have been so intertwined in usage that dictionaries define listening as "a sense of hearing," "attentive hearing," or "give an ear to...." That blurring is compounded by the fact that the condition of being unable-to-listen lacks the absolute clarity of deafness, blindness and illiteracy. According to the popular notion, if one is able to hear, one automatically listens. Consequently, as long as deafness identifies unable-to-hear, the possibility of someone unable-to-listen apparently lies beyond recognition.

Listening remains generally unappreciated while being the communicative skill most used and most essential to the human condition. In the sixty years since Paul Rankin's classic study of adults' daily use of the four (not two) basic communication skills -- reading, writing, speaking and listening -- we have persisted in treating listening as unimportant. In 1926, Paul T. Rankin, in his doctoral study, "The Measurement of the Ability to Understand Spoken Language," discovered that the average adult spent about seventy percent of his or her daily waking hours using one or more of those four basic communication skills. That seventy percent of a waking day during which people communicate is identified as a "communication day." While spending about nine percent of his or her communication day writing, sixteen percent reading, thirty-two percent speaking, the average adult spent a surprising forty-two percent of each communicative day listening. Rankin's findings have been replicated periodically over the ensuing sixty years. If anything, with the advent of television, the amount of daily listening time has expanded -- if we care to identify television viewing as listening.

A curious sense of unreality permeates the ability to listen. Listening functions as a hidden assumption in our daily lives. Every day we hear people around us saying, "Pay attention," or "Listen carefully," with little effect. In schools, the rare lesson about communication seldom mentions listening. Even within the library's Dewey Decimal System,

the few books about listening are spread through several locations, primarily hidden in the psychology section under "Attention." Supported academic research into this most-used skill is growing slowly, a rarity when compared with the thousands-upon-thousands of studies, papers, and books about reading and writing. Public and private grants organizations reflect that sense of unreality by rarely giving serious consideration to research proposals or teaching projects unless listening is linked as a secondary aspect of some "important" problem or issue. Over twenty million dollars are being spent currently on a much-needed publicity campaign for literacy, while virtually nothing is spent to support effective listening. The significance and substance of listening ability is casually overlooked, neglected, and just plain ignored.

CONFUSIONS ABOUT LISTENING

Conceptually, listening is confused often by the vagueness between do not listen and can not listen. We decry persons who do not listen, a condition in which those persons choose not to listen. That sense of choice is commonly attributed to the act of listening. On many occasions, when we accuse the other (usually a youngster or a spouse) of not listening, we are accusing that person of choosing to ignore us. On yet another hand, we say, "You are not listening," meaning you do not agree with me or you are not doing as I say. During the past ten years of study and teaching about listening, I have

come to the conclusion that as many as three out of five persons accused of choosing not to listen really do not know how to listen. However, without a name, the idea that people can not listen -- as distinct from deafness or choosing not to listen -- remains beyond our grasp.

Options currently available for naming the condition of unable-to-listen include using an antonym for listening, or using the term, illiteracy. Antonyms for the word, "listening," found in various Thesaurus include "ignorance," "neglect," "boredom," or "inattention," all of which are used far too commonly to identify specifically the condition of unable-to-listen. On the other hand, illiteracy has been implanted so firmly in the public mind as referring specifically to the ability to read and write that any specialized literacies or illiteracies (such as computer literacy or cultural illiteracy) will always have their identities interlocked with reading and writing. Thus, "listening literacy" or "listening illiteracy" would serve only to further confuse an already confused world.

If the condition of unable-to-listen -- and thus, the uniqueness of listening -- is to have any shape at all, any identity or reality, we must establish a name for being unable-to-listen.

A name specifying an inability to listen, in spite of being able to hear, is clearly in order. I propose **illistenacy**. This word is coined from three components:

prefix = il meaning "no, not, without, non-"

root = listen meaning "to consciously attend to, understand and respond to non-written messages in a consistent and effective manner."

suffix = acy meaning "an act of, the quality or state of being, a thing that, or a thing that is...."

Illistenacy then refers to the quality or state of being able to hear while being not able to consciously attend, understand, and respond to non-written messages in a consistent and effective manner. The **illistenate** is any individual who can hear, but cannot -- is not able to -- understand non-written messages in a consistent and effective manner. This broadest possible, non-technical definition of listening is intended to focus on the voluntary and purposeful functions of the skill while also distinguishing that skill from hearing.

The power of a name, such as **illistenacy**, is its ability to define and distinguish the shape of that which has been previously unidentified and therefore unnoticed. As we identify the nature and consequences of illistenacy, we may be able to begin correcting some dimensions of a condition once thought merely to be the predetermined and unalterable results of being human.

THE NATURE OF ILLISTENACY

The key to **illistenacy** is found in its sporadic nature. As the first component of the listening process, attention can be involuntary or voluntary. Involuntary attention

responds only briefly to attractive stimuli. Most people's involuntary attention is focused by abrupt stimuli changes such as loud sounds, bright lights, or different colors. By contrast, voluntary attention refers to the conscious control of attention and perception over longer spans of time such as listening to a lecture. Illistenates, depending primarily on involuntary attention during their listening efforts, experience an almost accidental reception of non-written messages. Without training, few people can voluntarily control their attention. Uncontrolled attention commonly causes oral messages to be ignored, to be misinterpreted, or to go in one ear and out the other. We are confused by illistenacy because everyone who can hear will occasionally identify and even remember some non-written messages. Thus, because illistenate persons do not understand how to use voluntary attention, their reception of messages is sporadic and virtually accidental.

The consequences of the illistenate's uncontrolled attention are a variety of poor listening behaviors. Because they are depending on involuntary attention, poor listeners tend to attend only to those messages which are easy or agreeable. They hear only what they want to hear because they cannot voluntarily control their attention. Finally, poor listeners have great difficulty with speaker-generated distractions; speaker mannerisms, appearance or speaking style

overwhelm the illistenate's involuntary attention. Thus, the short span of involuntary attention interferes with needs and demands of extended and difficult listening.

ILLISTENACY'S HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS

Four hidden assumptions sustain illistenacy. First, the traditional intermingling of hearing and listening confuses most people who, as a result, act as though recognizing sounds were listening. Few people recognize that while hearing is an involuntary and physical act, listening is a voluntary and mental act. This confusion compounds itself because even poor listeners occasionally have the short-term capacity to virtually tape record and replay some oral messages, suggesting that they can listen. Ironically, often after less than thirty seconds, that short-term memory erases causing the phenomena we call "in one ear and out the other." Second, that blurring of hearing and listening translates into passive behaviors. Most people assume that their physical presence equates with listening. Illistenates, failing to understand that listeners are active and responsive, remain inactive or move randomly while attempting to listen. The consequences of this inactivity or randomness is the sloppy listening plaguing our lives.

Third, illistenates tend to operate on a popular conviction that communication is really a magical act, either communication works or it doesn't, and there isn't anything to be done to change what happens. That sense of magic is

supported by the sporadic nature of involuntary attention; thus, inattention is assumed to be a natural, unchangeable part of being human.

The final hidden assumption obscuring illistenacy supposes that listening ability develops naturally through maturity and correlates directly with intelligence. This assumption causes most people to believe and act as though the ability to listen is really beyond instruction. Studies have revealed a pervasive lack of listening curricula and instruction in virtually all schools at any level, and a reluctance by most educators to seriously approach listening as a teachable subject. Listening is not generally recognized in the academic community as a legitimate subject.

All four hidden assumptions perpetuate **illistenacy**. However, without such a name for being unable-to-listen, we function in a world without ears, causing the vast majority of people to listen at such levels of inadequacy that frustration and failure permeate their daily lives, their schooling and their work.

Without a name for being unable-to-listen, our daily lives are constantly confused. The broadcast media constantly bombard us with messages, yet we have no systematic education in how to understand and handle that endless flow of messages. Our children spend about seven thousand hours in class between kindergarten and grade twelve, while spending about twenty thousand hours in front of a television set during those same

years. Advertisements claim that audiences are exposed to even more radio time. Ironically, public radio admits to attracting only one percent of the national population (which might reflect the percentage of adults actually able to listen, or not suffering from a "functional illistenacy.") In the light of all this exposure to the media, various commentators and media critics complain constantly about the poor quality of broadcast fare, assuming that the kind of listening ability they expect and demand for higher levels of broadcast content develops without instruction. However, without listening instruction, we can reasonably expect the continued proliferation of content without substance as message and couch potatoes as audience.

In our personal lives as individuals and family members, the failure to identify **illistenacy** creates havoc. Our greatest human need, as Ralph G. Nichols the father of listening suggested, may well be the need to be understood and the need to understand. A majority of human problems we face daily are caused by someone, or everyone, not listening. The most common cause of divorce, we are told, is "not communicating" which usually can translate into "not listening." Daily we hear, "they just don't listen." In virtually all arenas, the solution remains the same simplistic directive, "Listen carefully," to people who most often -- and most tragically -- do not know how to listen. Such a large

portion of the population is not able to listen that most people must hire professional listeners, such as clergy and psychologists, to talk out their problems. Family relationships and friendships are tested and broken usually because sadly people do not know how to listen to each other.

ILLISTENACY IN SCHOOL

Similarly, educational efforts are distorted by the inability to name the condition of not listening. The reality of the classroom is ignored by an educational paradigm of learning without listening. Virtually all studies and theories of classroom learning focus on reading and writing while ignoring the demand for listening in the instructional process. In most classrooms, students are expected to listen to instructions, explanations, definitions, discussions and assignments. From one-half of an average elementary class hour to two-thirds or more of an average secondary class hour, teachers talk. In college, the dominant mode of instruction is the lecture. Teachers talk, assuming their students already know how to listen.

Ignored is the fact that the characteristics of a "good student" listed by teachers describe a good listener. Teachers tend to discount the thought that students who get good grades are not smarter; they listen better. James Brown's study at the University of Minnesota, revealing that honors graduates themselves identified the basic skill most essential to their academic success as listening, is also

ignored. When Brown went on to test the reading and listening abilities of honors graduates, he found the only significant difference distinguishing the magna cum laude from the cum laude graduates appeared in their listening test scores. While the average reading score was identical for both groups, the magna cum laude students' listening test scores were higher (see Chart #1). Almost everyone ignored Sperry Corporation's two-page advertisement in a 1978 issue of Fortune Magazine challenging, "How can we expect him to learn when we haven't even taught him to listen?"

Ironically, while listening is the cornerstone of the learning process, explicit instruction in how to listen remains trapped in a Catch-22 situation. Since early 1980, over thirty-seven state education systems, including West Virginia, have specifically identified one competency or learning outcome as listening. Yet, Paul Rankin, in his 1926 classic study of communication skills, discovered that listening instruction time occupied a scant eight percent of the communication skills curriculum (see Chart #2). In the intervening sixty years, that condition has remained unchanged. Listening courses are rare anywhere in system from kindergarten through graduate school. The lack of instructional time devoted to listening is matched by a lack of instructional materials. A recent survey of elementary language arts textbooks found that an average of ten percent of their content was devoted to listening, usually as a collection of exercises. Most how-to-study materials focus on

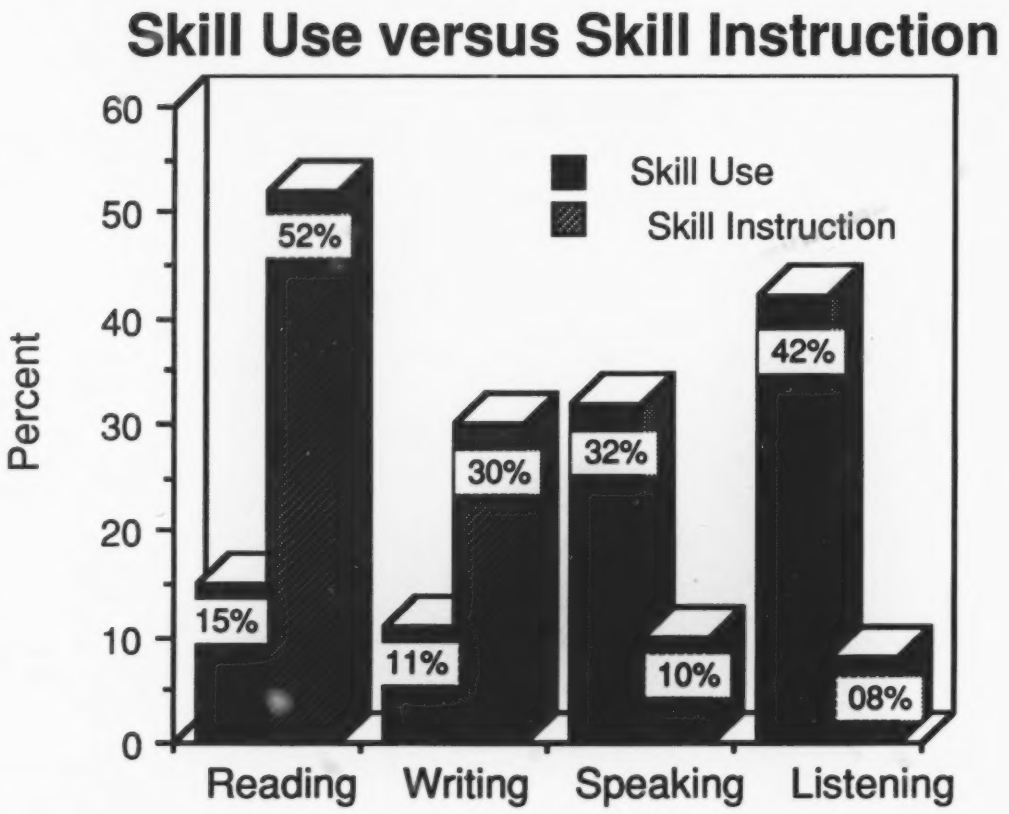
Skill Use versus Skill Instruction
Percent
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Skill Use
Skill Instruction
52%
15%
30%
11%
32%
10%
42%
08%
Reading
Writing
Speaking
Listening

Chart #1

	University of Minnesota Graduates	
	with high honors	with highest honors
	Average Scores	
The Nelson-Denny Reading Test	78	78
The Brown-Carlson Listening Test	81	92

student behavior outside the classroom, occasionally saying such things as, "Listen carefully," or "Listen effectively," as though everyone knows how. Furthermore, student achievement using their listening skill is generally ignored on school reportcards; most reportcards list the important subjects such as reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic, but not listening. Recently, The College Board described listening as "the most used and least taught skill." Schools continue to operate as though the exposure to all those teachers talking will promote effective listening ability.

The lack of support for listening instruction extends to testing. While basic skills tests litter the school scene, the skill of listening is rarely tested. (Tests of listening, we are told, have serious questions of validity which contaminate their use; however, those same questions of validity are raised about the commonly used and reported reading tests.) Many schools act as though an audiological examination determines listening competence. Apparently, listening is just not worth the bother. Still, teachers lounges throughout the nation echo with, "They just don't listen."

The tragic irony of ignoring listening reveals itself when we consider its implications in the light of classroom. Ralph G. Nichols reported in his seminal book, Are You Listening?, a study revealing that as students progress through the grades 1 - 12 without listening instruction, the percentage of

untrained students actually listening during class eroded. Nichols found that when teachers interrupted their lessons at random to check on how many students were listening, the number of student listeners slid from ninety percent of first graders to eighty percent of second graders, skidded to forty-eight percent of junior high students, before plunging to a dismal twenty-eight percent of high school students (see Chart #3). Most teachers examining charts of that erosion agree most students are not listening. This tragedy intensifies when students of listening ask, "Why wasn't I taught how to listen before now?"

Still most educators persist in acting as though the daily flood of teacher talk, coupled with a few simplistic directives, is the only form of listening instruction necessary. Those same educators, however, assert categorically that exercises and practice without instruction in any other subject are meaningless, if not damaging. (Practicing teachers plead that they have no training in listening or how to teach listening. Even today, few colleges offer separate listening courses.) The insidiousness of illistenacy is best illustrated by the teacher who said, "Listening instruction is imperative; but teaching listening is not my job." Without a name for the inability to listen, we persist in condemning television and other social ills for the poor performance of our illistenate students.

The consequences of illistenacy compound themselves since most teachers pass through that same curricula devoid of

Teachers Talking & Untrained Students Listening

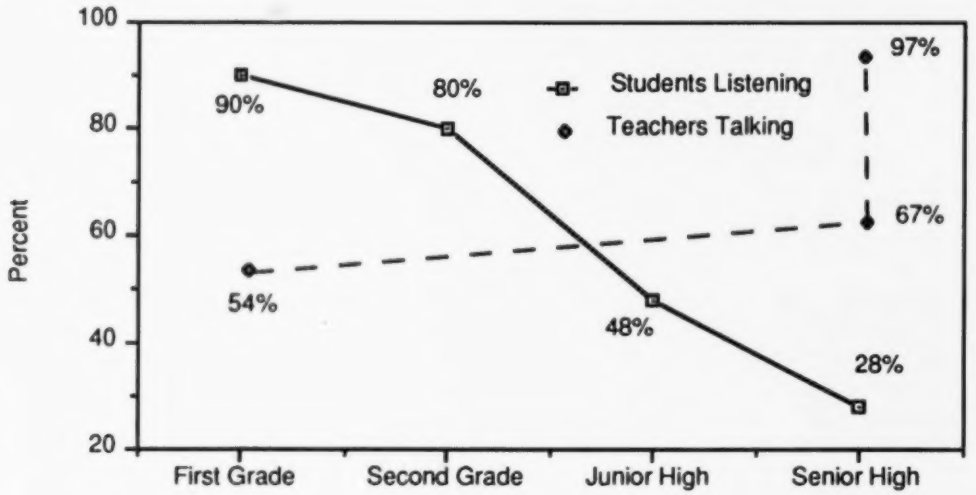

Chart #3

listening instruction; student illistenacy grows into teacher illistenacy. Prevailing educational theory and practice assumes that previous school experience provides sufficient listening skills for students and teachers. In three thousand-seven hundred pages examined in fifteen textbooks specifically for training teachers in communication knowledge and skills, listening was mentioned on a total of seventy-four pages, with specific text materials about teachers using the skill of listening found on a total of only eleven pages. Listening by teachers is treated as an implicit, natural part of the instructional process. Yet, the most common observation in educational literature about teachers and listening is "most teachers do not listen." Thus, most teachers and students end up being frustrated by their unrecognized inability to listen. For the lack of a name, illistenacy lies unnoticed at the root of many educational problems.

We must recognize illistenacy and that, like any skill, listening ability must be taught and learned. (Legislative bodies hold hearings, but are they listening?) The few effective listeners functioning in contemporary society are taught usually through the modeling of effective listeners around them; modeling, after all, remains the most powerful form of instruction. Unfortunately, the majority of people are surrounded by illistenates creating an experiential concept of reality which does not include effective listening behavior. Only within the past several decades, through the

persistence of a few listening proponents, and the birth of the International Listening Association in 1979, has listening instruction become available in a slowly growing number of schools and business training programs. Since as many as three out of five persons suffer from illistenacy, effective listening instruction is urgently needed. We can no longer tolerate the lack of a name, such as **illistenacy**, deafening us to the development of effective listening.

Clearly, our failure to name the condition of being unable-to- listen perpetuates a complex of human problems. Without recognition of **illistenacy**, society will continue to overlook, forget, neglect, ignore and misuse the skill of listening. Listening ability is so essential to human experience and effort that both listening and **illistenacy** must be clearly named and treated. We can no longer afford the luxury of lives spent wandering through a looking glass world of **illistenacy**.

FOR FURTHER READING

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